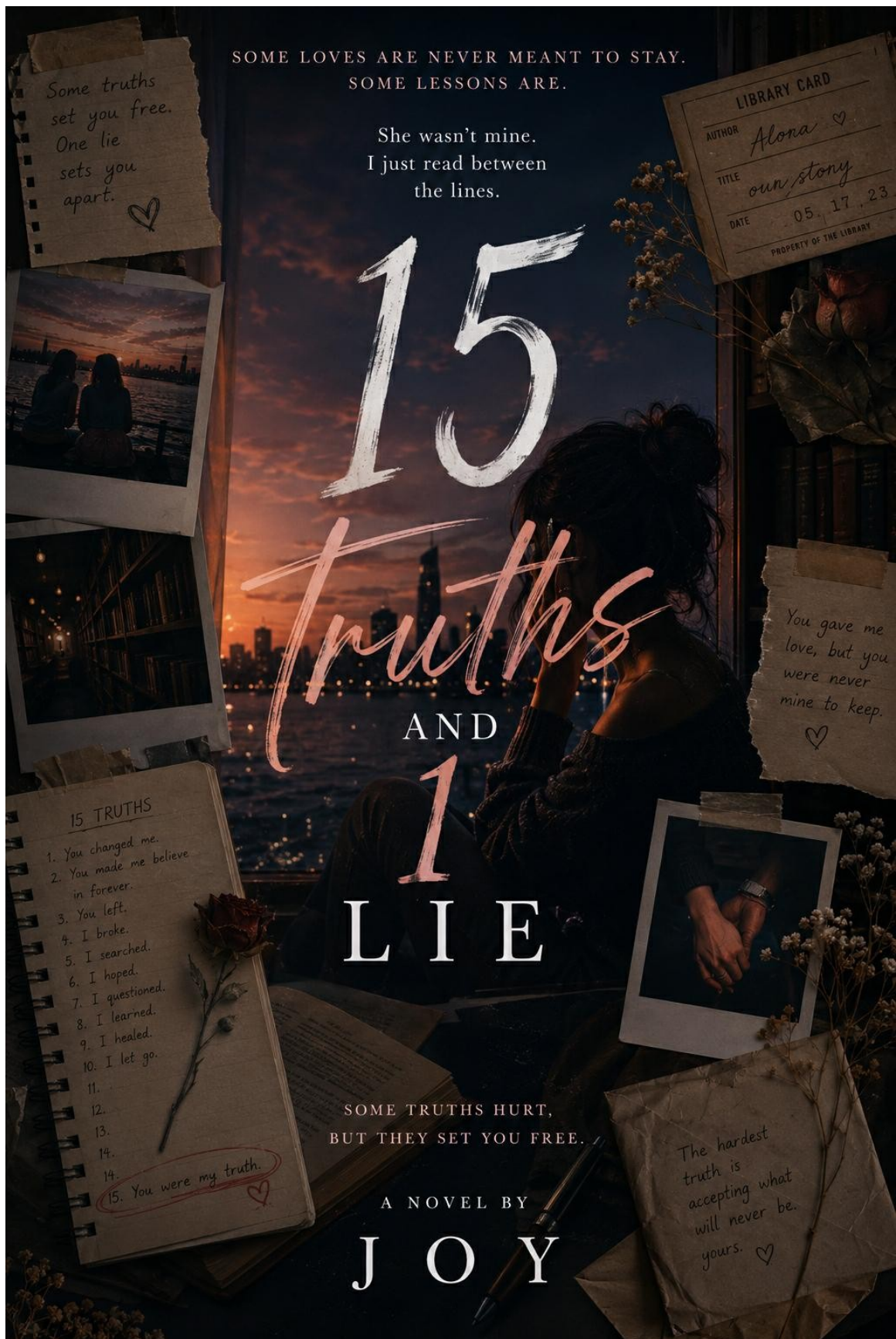




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Alora Montez doesn't believe in love-she believes in experiments.

When she transfers to Ashley Valencia's school, she creates a game with one rule: make the quietest girl fall in love.

Sixteen acts.

Fifteen of them real.

One will destroy everything.

Ashley never asked to be chosen.

But the more Alora gives, the more Ashley falls-until the line between truth and manipulation disappears.

What happens when the girl who gave you the world was never yours to begin with?



ALORA

book 1

*I left to survive.
I came back to
face everything
I'd spent years
running from.*



*Some people come back to
apologize.
Others come back to stay.*



FOREST GREEN

CREAM

DARK BROWN

TAUPE

GOLD

Share it to as many people as you can.
@Thato_Maime on Wattpad.

Based on a true story (21April2026).

This story was never just meant to be a story.

It's a collection of almosts, of truths too heavy to say out loud, and lies we tell ourselves just to survive them. 15 Truths and 1 Lie was born from the idea that sometimes the hardest thing isn't not knowing the truth... it's living with it and pretending it doesn't change anything.

Some parts of this book will feel soft. Others will feel like they're cutting too close. That's intentional. I wanted it to feel real in the way memories don't always make sense, but they still stay with you anyway.

If you see yourself in Ashley, or Alora, or even in the silence between them—just know you're not alone in that feeling. Love, friendship, and loss don't always come with clear endings. Sometimes they just... linger.

Thank you for reading with your heart, not just your eyes.

—Joy

CHAPTER 1:

The Dare

The library smells like old paper and lemon polish.

Safe. Predictable. Boring.

Until she sits down.

I don't hear her coming. No squeak of chair legs. No shift of air. One second I'm alone with my Media Studies textbook and the stupid essay I haven't started, the next there's a black hoodie across from me.

No books. No bag. No warning.

Just a notebook sliding across the table.

The cover is blank except for two words in pencil, pressed so hard the paper almost tore: *For Later*.

I stare at it. Then at her.

I've seen her before. Roof. Break. Always alone. Always with her hood up, even when it's hot. She never talks to anyone. She never looks at anyone. Except once, last week, I caught her watching me from the second floor window while I waited for the taxi. I looked away first.

Now she's here. Close enough that I can see there's ink smudged on her thumb. Close enough that I can smell rain on her sleeves even though it's not raining.

"Ashley, right?"

Her voice is quiet. Like she's been practicing it in her head and isn't sure it sounds right out loud. Like she's not used to using it.

I blink. My textbook is suddenly the most interesting thing in Maseru. "Do I know you?"

“No.” She leans forward. Her sleeves swallow her hands completely. “But you will.”

She taps the notebook. Once. The sound is too loud in the quiet section. The librarian doesn’t look up.

I should ask her name. I should ask her why she’s here. I should get up and move tables. Instead, I say nothing. Because my mouth is dry and my brain is stuck on the way she said my name. Like she’s said it before. A lot.

“Six months,” she says. “Sixteen things. Fifteen of them will be true. One will be a lie.”

I laugh. It comes out as a broken cough. “Is this some kind of freshman initiation? Because I’m in Grade 11, and I don’t—”

“Do I look like I join clubs?”

No. She looks like she cuts class to sit on roofs and count pigeons. She looks like she knows every exit in this building. She looks like she’s been counting my exits too.

I close my textbook. “What’s the point?”

She doesn’t blink. Her eyes are dark. Not brown. Dark, like storm clouds

before the sky breaks over the mountains.

“I’m going to show you what love looks like.”

The words land wrong. Too heavy for 1:03 PM on a Tuesday. Too heavy for a stranger who smells like rain and graphite.

I’ve never dated anyone. Never kissed anyone. Never held hands with anyone and meant it. Love, for me, is something that happens in movies and to other girls. Girls who are louder. Braver. Girls who don’t count ceiling tiles when their chest gets tight.

So when she says "love", it doesn't sound romantic. It sounds like a warning.

"You're not gonna "tell" me," she continues. Her eyes never leave mine. "I'm gonna "do" it. Fifteen ways. Acts. Moments. Things people do when they love someone. For real. Not the fake version."

"And the lie?" My throat feels like I swallowed dust.

She smiles. Barely. The corner of her mouth twitches like the movement hurts. Like she forgot how. "That's for you to figure out."

I should walk away. I should tell the librarian with the lemon polish and the strict rules about noise. I should text my mom "some weirdo is harassing me come get me".

Instead I say: "What's Truth #1?"

She stands. The chair doesn't even scrape against the floor. She pushes the notebook toward me. Her finger brushes the cover when she does. For Later.

"Open it when you're ready. But Ashley?"

I look up. Mistake. Her eyes are darker up close. Darker and tired and something else I can't name.

"If you say yes, you don't get to quit when it starts feeling real."

Then she's gone. No footsteps. No door. Just the smell of lemon polish and a blank notebook and a heart doing something feral and stupid in my chest.

I don't open it in the library.

I don't open it during Math when Mr. Molefe asks why I'm not taking notes.

I don't open it on the taxi ride home while everyone else scrolls TikTok

and laughs at things I don't understand.

I wait until I'm home. Door locked. School shoes kicked off. Uniform still on because I don't trust myself to move yet.

The notebook is heavier than it should be. The pencil words For Later looks different in my bedroom light. Less like a dare. More like a promise.

First page.

One sentence.

Truth #1: I brought you tea when you were having a panic attack in the bathroom at break yesterday. You didn't see me. I left it outside the door. Still warm.

The air leaves my lungs all at once.

Because yesterday at break, I did have a panic attack. Third stall in the girls' bathroom. Knees pulled to my chest. Back against the cold door. Breathing like I was drowning on dry land. I didn't tell anyone. I never do. I counted the tiles on the wall. Twenty-eight. I counted them four times until I could stand up without my legs shaking.

And when I opened the stall door,
there was a paper cup of rooibos tea
on the floor. No sugar. No milk. Just
how I like it, even though I've never
told anyone that. Still warm. Steam
curling up like a question mark.

No one in the hallway. No footsteps
walking away. Just tea. And me.

I thought I hallucinated it. I thought
the panic made me imagine
kindness because I wanted it so
badly. I drank it anyway because it
was warm and I was cold from the
inside out.

My hands are shaking now.

She was there.

Outside the door. While I was falling apart.

She knew.

"Sixteen things," she said. "Fifteen of them will be true."

"I'm going to show you what love looks like."

I flip the page.

Blank.

The rest of the notebook is blank.

Waiting.

For Later.

I press my forehead to the desk. The wood is cool against my skin.

I've never been loved before. Not like that. Not in a way that pays attention to how I take my tea. Not in a way that stands guard while I break.

If that was Truth #1... what's Truth #2?

And more important: what's the lie?

Chapter 2: The Pattern

Ashley's POV

I don't look for her on purpose.

That's the first thing I tell myself
when I start noticing her everywhere.

Near the stairwell after Chemistry.

At the back of assembly with her
hood up and her head tilted slightly
like she's listening to something no
one else can hear.

Outside the gate after school,
standing beside the cracked wall
near the taxis.

Never close enough to call out.

Never far enough to ignore.

It should feel creepy.

Instead, it feels familiar too quickly.

That's the problem.

The notebook stays in my bag for three days before I open it again.

Not because I'm scared.

Because I know I'll believe her if I do.

And some part of me already does, which is worse.

I'm in the library again when I finally take it out.

Same table.

Same smell of lemon polish.

Like the room has been paused since the last time she sat across from me.

Truth #1 stares back at me from the page.

I brought you tea when you were
having a panic attack in the
bathroom at break yesterday.
I read it again.
Then again.
Looking for a crack in it.
A joke. A mistake. Something.
But all I find is memory.
The warmth of the paper cup against
my hands.
The steam.
The exact way my breathing slowed
after the third sip.
She noticed all of that.
Nobody notices things like that.
“You reread things when you want
them to become less true.”
I nearly drop the notebook.

She's standing at the end of the shelf beside my table like she appeared out of the books themselves.

Black hoodie.

Rain smell.

Dark eyes already on me.

"You need to stop doing that," I whisper harshly.

"Walking?"

"Appearing."

A small pause.

Then, somehow, the corner of her mouth lifts slightly.

"You noticed."

That should not make my chest tighten the way it does.

She sits across from me again.

Like she belongs there.

Like she always has.

No books.

No bag.

Just her hands disappearing into sleeves too long for her fingers.

“You skipped lunch,” she says casually.

I blink. “What?”

“You only chew the inside of your cheek like that when you’re hungry.”

I immediately stop.

Which makes her glance away like she’s hiding amusement.

“What is wrong with you?” I ask quietly.

“A lot of things,” she replies.

Too fast.

Too honest.

The answer catches me off guard enough that I forget to be irritated.

“You keep watching me,” I say.

“I keep noticing you.”

“That’s basically the same thing.”

“No,” she says softly. “Watching is when you’re looking for something.”

“And noticing?”

Her eyes meet mine fully then.

“Noticing is when something becomes impossible not to see.”

I hate how much that affects me.

Because nobody has ever spoken about me like that before.

Like I’m worth studying.

Like my habits matter.

Like the tiny invisible pieces of me
aren't invisible at all.

"You don't do this with other
people?" I ask.

"No."

"Why me?"

For the first time since I met her,
Alora hesitates.

Not long.

Just enough to feel real.

Then:

"Because you disappear in crowded
places."

I stare at her.

She continues before I can respond.

"You laugh quieter when there are
too many people around. You leave
rooms before conversations end. You
stand near exits without realizing it."

Every word lands directly somewhere
I keep hidden.

Not because they're wrong.

Because they're right.

"That's creepy," I say finally.

"Probably."

"You're admitting it?"

"I didn't say it was healthy."

Another tiny almost-smile.

There and gone.

I look down at the notebook because
it's easier than looking at her.

"What happens now?" I ask quietly.

"Now?"

She leans back slightly.

"Now I keep my promise."

The air suddenly feels too warm.

"Sixteen things," I murmur.

“Fifteen truths,” she corrects softly.

“And one lie.”

Something unreadable flickers across her face then.

Not guilt.

Not fear.

Something sadder.

“Yeah,” she says quietly. “One lie.”

The bell rings.

Neither of us moves immediately.

Students flood past the library doors outside.

Noise. Motion. Life continuing normally.

But it doesn’t feel normal in here anymore.

It feels smaller.

Closer.

Like the space between us changed shape while I wasn't paying attention.

Before she stands, she reaches into her sleeve and places something beside my notebook.

A chocolate bar.

My favorite kind.

The exact brand I buy from the tuckshop every Friday when school feels unbearable.

I look up too fast.

"How did you—"

"You always buy two," she says.

A pause.

"But you only eat one. The other stays in your bag for emergencies."

I can't speak.

Because she's right.

Again.

She stands slowly.

Then stops beside my chair.

Close enough that I can smell rain
and graphite again.

Close enough that my heartbeat
turns traitorous.

“Truth #2,” she says softly.

I wait until she leaves before opening
the notebook.

My fingers shake anyway.

The next page only has one sentence
written on it.

Truth #2: Love is paying attention to
the things people think nobody sees.

I stare at the words until they blur.

Because I think—

somewhere between the tea and the chocolate and the terrifying way she looks at me—

I'm starting to understand the danger now.

Not that Alora might hurt me.

But that she might be the first person who actually knows how to love me exactly the way I've always wanted.

Chapter 3: The Almost Ashley's POV

After that, everything starts meaning too much.

That's the problem with being noticed properly for the first time.

You begin noticing back.

The way Alora taps her fingers twice against surfaces before she speaks.

The way she never wears the same hoodie two days in a row, but they're all black anyway.

The way she looks at me like she's reading something slightly ahead of where I am.

I tell myself I'm only paying attention because she does.

That feels safer than admitting I want to.

We still don't talk like normal people.

No good mornings.

No texting.

No sitting together in class.

It's more like she appears beside moments instead of inside them.

And somehow, that's worse.

Because every time she leaves, I spend the rest of the day waiting for the next time she'll appear again.

On Thursday, it rains during lunch.

Not dramatic movie rain.

Just cold drizzle and grey skies
hanging low over Maseru.

Most people crowd into classrooms
or under corridors.

I end up in the art block because it's
quiet there.

Empty too.

At least, I think it is.

Until I see her sitting on the floor
near the windows.

Sketchbook balanced on her knees.

Hood down for once.

That's what catches me first.

Her hair curls slightly at the ends
from the humidity. Dark. Messy.
Softer than I expected.

She looks up when she hears me.

Not startled.

Like she already knew it would be me.

“You hate rain,” she says.

I stop mid-step.

“How do you know that?”

“You tense your jaw every time thunder starts.”

I stare at her.

“You seriously need help.”

A pause.

Then she nods once.

“Probably.”

I should leave.

Instead, I sit across from her.

Not close.

But not far either.

Rain taps softly against the windows beside us.

For a while, neither of us speaks.
She keeps sketching.
I keep pretending not to look at her
hands.
“What are you drawing?” I ask
eventually.
She turns the sketchbook slightly
before I can stop her.
It’s the library.
Not exactly realistic.
More like fragments.
Shelves.
Light through windows.
A notebook on a table.
Me.
Or pieces of me.
Hands curled around a paper cup.
Head bent down.

Eyes hidden.

“You drew me?”

“You were there.”

“That’s not an explanation.”

“It’s the only one I have.”

I don’t know why that makes my chest ache a little.

“You make everything sound bigger than it is,” I mutter.

Alora finally stops drawing.

“No,” she says quietly.

“I think you make everything smaller so it hurts less.”

That lands too directly.

I look away immediately.

Outside, rainwater slides down the windows in uneven lines.

“I didn’t ask to be analyzed all the time,” I say.

“I know.”

“Then why do it?”

Silence.

Not empty silence.

Thinking silence.

Then:

“Because loving someone is paying attention.”

The word hits differently this time.

Loving.

Not love.

Present tense.

Active.

Dangerous.

“You barely know me,” I whisper.

A strange expression crosses her face then.

Something between sadness and amusement.

“Ashley,” she says softly.

“I know what flavor cough syrup you buy when you’re sick.”

My breath catches.

“I know you rewrite your notes when your thoughts get too loud because neat handwriting calms you down.”

I can’t move.

“I know you pretend to tie your shoe when you feel overwhelmed in crowded hallways.”

Every sentence strips something open inside me.

Not because she’s exposing secrets.

Because no one ever cared enough to notice them.

“You make it sound romantic,” I say quietly.

“Is it not?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

I swallow hard.

“Whether you plan on staying.”

The room goes still.

Not silent.

Still.

Even the rain feels quieter suddenly.

Alora looks down at the sketchbook in her lap.

For the first time since I met her, she looks unsure.

Not mysterious.

Not unreadable.

Just... young.

Like there's something she wants to say carefully.

"You're thinking too far ahead," she says at last.

That isn't an answer.

Which means it probably is.

I stand before I can think better of it.

Because something fragile just cracked open inside my chest, and I suddenly need distance from her before she sees that too.

But when I move past her, she reaches out instinctively—
and catches my wrist.

The contact is brief.

Barely a second.

Still enough to stop my heartbeat
completely.

Her hand is cold.

Mine isn't.

Neither of us moves.

And suddenly every tiny thing
between us becomes enormous.

The rain.

The breathing.

The space.

The fact that this is the first time
she's touched me on purpose.

Alora lets go immediately.

Like she crossed a line she promised
herself she wouldn't.

"Sorry," she says softly.

But she doesn't sound sorry.

She sounds affected.

Which is somehow worse.

I look down at my wrist after she pulls away.

Like her hand left something there.

“You should stop doing that,” I whisper.

“Doing what?”

“Making everything feel important.”

Her expression changes again.

Subtle.

Almost invisible.

But there.

Then she says the worst possible thing:

“I think it already was important before I got here.”

I leave before she can see what that does to me.

I barely make it to the corridor
before opening the notebook.
Rainlight spills across the page.
One new sentence waits for me.
Truth #3: Some people will hold your
heart carefully even when they have
no intention of keeping it.
I stop breathing for a second.
Because suddenly—
suddenly—
I understand why the notebook
scares me.
Not because it knows me.
But because every truth feels like it's
preparing me for something.
Something that hasn't happened yet.
Something Alora already seems to
know.

Chapter 4:The Routine

Ashley's POV

It starts becoming normal too fast.
That should scare me more than it
does.

Alora starts appearing beside me so naturally that eventually I stop questioning it.

A seat across from me in the library.

A quiet “move” before stealing half my desk space during study period.

Her shoulder brushing mine in crowded corridors like she’s already memorized the shape of walking beside me.

None of it is dramatic.

That’s what makes it dangerous.

It feels easy.

“You always do that.”

I look up from my notebook.

Alora is lying sideways on the grass behind the library, one arm folded beneath her head.

“Do what?”

“You tap your pen four times before writing something important.”

I stare at my hand.

Because I am doing it.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

She watches me with that quiet almost-smile again.

Not mocking.

Just... fond.

“You notice too much,” I mutter.

“You notice too little.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It does to me.”

I don’t realize how attached I’m getting until Friday.

Because Friday is the first day she
doesn't show up.

I wait anyway.

At lunch.

Behind the library.

Same place as always.

Students pass by in waves of noise
and movement while I pretend to do
homework.

I check my phone three times even
though we've never texted.

That's the embarrassing part.

She never asked for routines.

I built them myself.

By the end of the day, I'm irritated.

Not worried.

Definitely not disappointed.

Just irritated.

That's what I tell myself while walking toward the gate alone.

"You look miserable."

I turn too quickly.

Alora is standing near the taxis with her hood up and her hands hidden in her sleeves.

Relief hits me so hard it immediately annoys me.

"Where were you?"

The question leaves my mouth before I can make it casual.

Something flickers across her face.

Small.

Quick.

But there.

"You waited for me?"

I hate how vulnerable that sounds
now that she said it out loud.

“No.”

A pause.

“Maybe a little.”

And suddenly she’s smiling properly.
Not the tiny corner-mouth thing she
usually does.

An actual smile.

Soft enough to change her whole
face.

It knocks the air directly out of me.

“I had detention,” she says.

“What for?”

“Existing incorrectly.”

I laugh before I can stop myself.

She watches me carefully after that.
Like the sound matters.

We walk toward the taxis together slowly.

The sky above our heads is turning orange at the edges.

People move around us.

Cars.

Voices.

Music leaking from someone's phone nearby.

But somehow the space beside her still feels quieter than everything else.

"You know," Alora says suddenly, "you talk more around me now."

I glance at her.

"That's your fault."

"How?"

"You keep asking questions."

“You keep answering them.”

“That’s generally how conversations work.”

She hums thoughtfully like she’s considering that information seriously.

“You still hide the important answers though.”

I look away immediately.

Because she’s right.

Again.

“What important answers?”

“The ones you think people won’t like.”

I shove her shoulder lightly before I can think better of it.

Not hard.

Barely anything.

Still—

both of us go quiet immediately afterward.

Because it's the first casual touch between us.

Not accidental.

Not stopping someone from leaving.

Just instinctive.

Human.

Alora looks down briefly like she felt it somewhere deeper than she expected.

"You okay?" I ask quietly.

She nods once.

Too quickly.

"Yeah."

But her voice sounds different now.

Softer.

That night, I catch myself smiling at my phone like an idiot while rereading old conversations with other people that suddenly feel empty.

Because nobody else notices things the way she does.

Nobody else listens like every sentence matters.

Nobody else makes me feel so sharply visible.

I open the notebook before bed.

This time, I already know there'll be something new waiting for me.

That realization should probably concern me.

Instead, it excites me.

The next page holds only one sentence.

Truth #4: The most dangerous part of being loved correctly is how quickly it starts to feel like you've always deserved it.

I read it three times.

Then once more.

And sometime around the fourth—

I realize I'm no longer scared of the notebook.

I'm starting to look forward to it.

Which is probably worse.

Chapter 5: The Weight of Presence

Ashley's POV

I start noticing something I shouldn't.

Or maybe I always did, and I just didn't have a name for it before her.

Alora doesn't take up space like other people.

She adjusts it.

Like the world bends slightly to make room for her without making a sound.

It shows up in small ways.

A seat that somehow stays empty until she arrives.

A conversation that stops exactly
when she walks past.

A silence that feels aimed instead of
accidental.

“You’re staring again.”

I blink.

We’re in the library.

Same table.

Same time we’ve been sitting
together for the past week without
ever agreeing to it.

“I’m not staring,” I say automatically.

She raises an eyebrow slightly.

“That was longer than a glance.”

I look back down at my work.

“You count things?”

“Only patterns.”

“That’s the same thing you always say.”

“It’s because it’s the same thing I always do.”

There’s something calmer about her today.

Not distant.

Just... settled.

Like she’s less guarded than usual.

It should make me relax.

Instead, it makes me pay closer attention.

“You’re quiet,” I say.

She hums softly.

“I’m always quiet.”

“No,” I reply before thinking.

“You’re different quiet today.”

That gets her attention.

Her pen stops mid-word.

She looks at me for a second too long.

“Different how?”

I hesitate.

Because I don't have a good answer.

Just a feeling.

Like she's closer without moving.

“Never mind,” I say quickly.

But she doesn't let it go.

“That's your problem,” she says gently.

“You notice things but don't finish thinking them.”

I frown.

“I finish thinking them.”

“No,” she says.

“You stop right before they become uncomfortable.”

That lands strangely.

Not insulting.

Just accurate enough to sit heavy in my chest.

I change the subject.

“What are you writing?”

She turns the notebook slightly toward me.

It’s not the truth notebook.

This one has sketches again.

But not of places.

Of moments.

A hand holding a cup.

A half-turned head in a corridor.

A figure sitting behind a library shelf.

Me.

Or versions of me I don't remember sitting still long enough to become.

"Do you always draw people?" I ask quietly.

"No."

"Then why me?"

A pause.

Long enough that I think she won't answer.

Then:

"Because you don't stay the same in my memory."

I blink.

"That doesn't make sense."

"It does," she says softly.

"You just think identity is supposed to be stable."

I lean back in my chair.

Trying to make sense of her like
she's a puzzle I didn't ask for.

"You talk like you've known me
longer than a week," I say.

She doesn't deny it.

Which should feel weird.

It doesn't.

It feels... familiar.

Like something I already accepted
without realizing.

"You ever feel like people only see
parts of you?" I ask before I can stop
myself.

Alora looks up.

Properly this time.

"Yes," she says.

No hesitation.

That surprises me more than it should.

“So what do you do about it?” I ask.

She closes the sketchbook slowly.

“Nothing.”

A pause.

“Most people don’t notice they’re incomplete to others.”

We sit in silence after that.

Not uncomfortable.

Just heavier.

Outside, students pass the library window laughing too loudly about something I can’t hear properly.

It feels like a different world.

One we’re not fully part of.

When I finally speak again, my voice is quieter.

“Do you ever get tired?”

She tilts her head slightly.

“Of what?”

“Paying that much attention.”

A long pause.

Then, very softly:

“No one’s ever complained about
being seen properly before.”

That hits something in me I don’t
know how to name.

I leave first that day.

Not because I want to.

Because staying feels like stepping
into something I don’t have the
language for yet.

At the door, I hesitate.

Turn back slightly.

She’s still sitting there.

Watching me leave like she always does.

But this time, it doesn't feel like observation.

It feels like holding on without touching.

That night, I don't open the notebook immediately.

I sit with it on my desk.

Just looking at it.

Waiting for it to feel like a warning again.

It doesn't.

It feels like anticipation instead.

When I finally open it, there's only one line.

Truth #5: Being understood is the closest thing to being held without hands.

I close it slowly.

Because I realize something I don't want to admit out loud.

I don't feel watched anymore.

I feel known.

And I'm not sure which one I was more afraid of.

Chapter 6: The Shift

Ashley's POV

Something changes without asking permission first.

That's the only way I know how to describe it.

Not in Alora.

Not in the notebook.

In me.

It starts with small gaps in my memory that don't feel like forgetting.

More like skipping.

Like my mind deciding some details aren't important enough to store.

I notice it first in class.

Mr. Molefe asks a question I know I knew the answer to yesterday.

My mouth opens.

Nothing comes out.

Not confusion.

Just absence.

"You're not sleeping again," Alora says during break.

We're sitting on the edge of the corridor wall.

Her legs swing slightly.

Mine don't.

"I slept," I reply automatically.

"That's not what I said."

I look at her.

She's watching me in that same way again.

Not intense.

Not soft.

Just aware.

Like she's noticing a version of me I haven't fully met yet.

"I'm fine," I say.

She doesn't respond immediately.

Instead, she reaches into her sleeve
and pulls out a pen.

Places it between us.

My pen.

Again.

I freeze.

"I found it in the library yesterday,"
she says.

I stare at it.

"I didn't lose it."

A pause.

Then she nods once.

"You did."

I shake my head slightly.

"No, I would've noticed."

"That's the problem," she says
quietly.

"You don't notice when things leave you slowly."

That shouldn't land the way it does.

But it does.

Later, I open my bag.

The notebook is there.

But something feels off about it.

Not physically.

Positionally.

Like it moved slightly when I wasn't looking.

I tell myself that's impossible.

I still open it anyway.

Truth #5 is still there.

Same sentence.

Same handwriting.

But the ink looks darker than I remember.

Heavier.

Like it's been rewritten over itself too many times to stay light anymore.

I flip back.

Truth #4 feels unfamiliar.

Not changed.

Just... less mine.

Like I read it once but didn't fully absorb it.

Like it belongs to someone who understands it better than I do now.

"You're doing it again."

I jump slightly.

Alora is standing behind me.

I didn't hear her come in.

I turn.

"You can't just appear like that," I say quickly.

She tilts her head.

"I walked through the door."

"I didn't see you."

"That's not the same thing."

She sits across from me without asking.

Of course she does.

Her gaze drops to the notebook.

"You're checking it too often," she says.

"I'm trying to understand it."

"That's not what you're doing."

"Then what am I doing?"

A pause.

Longer this time.

Then she says it quietly:

"You're checking if you're still yourself."

That makes my stomach twist.
Because it's too close.
Too accurate.
Too specific.
"That doesn't make sense," I say.
"It does," she replies.
"You just assume identity is stable."
I laugh once, but it comes out wrong.
"You sound like you've been
rehearsing that."
"I haven't."
"Then why does it feel like you've
said it before?"
Alora doesn't answer immediately.
That's new.
Instead, she looks at me differently.
Like she's not just observing
anymore.

Like she's confirming something.

"Have you noticed the gaps?" she asks quietly.

"What gaps?"

She gestures slightly toward my notebook.

"The ones between what you remember and what you can prove."

I go still.

Because I have noticed them.

I just didn't name them.

"I forget small things," I admit reluctantly.

"Names. Details. Steps in conversations."

She nods once.

"That's normal."

"No," I say immediately.

"It doesn't feel normal."

Silence.

Then she says something softer:

"It gets worse when you rely on someone else to fill them."

I look at her sharply.

"What does that mean?"

Alora hesitates.

Just for a second.

Then:

"It means attention changes memory."

I don't like that sentence.

Not because it's complicated.

Because it feels true in a way I don't understand yet.

That night, I test it.

I sit in my room and try to replay the day.

But the more I focus, the more it slips.

The corridor conversation is clear.

Then blurry.

Then missing pieces I can't recover.

The pen.

Her voice.

My reaction.

All there.

All unstable.

I open the notebook again.

My hands feel colder now.

Truth #6 is already waiting.

Truth #6: When someone pays attention to you long enough, you start using them as your memory.

I stare at it for a long time.

Because I realize something quietly terrifying.

I've started remembering things through Alora.

Not because she told me.

But because I was there when she did.

And if she disappears-

I don't know what I lose first.

Her.

Or myself.

Chapter 7: The Softening

Ashley's POV

It starts the way good things usually start.

Without permission.

Without warning.

Without fear.

Alora calls me after school.

Not text.

A call.

My phone rings while I'm still packing my bag, and for a second I just stare at it like it doesn't belong to my life.

Her name isn't saved with anything dramatic.

Just: Alora

Simple.

Like she didn't need extra meaning to exist.

"Hello?" I answer carefully.

There's a pause on the other end.

Then her voice, softer than usual.

"You left early."

It's not a question.

It never is with her.

"I had to go," I say, slipping my books into my bag.

Another pause.

Then—

"Walk with me tomorrow."

My hand stills.

"...What?"

"I don't like walking alone anymore," she adds quietly.

Like it's obvious.

Like it's been true for a while.

That should feel strange.

It doesn't.

It feels... wanted.

The next day, she's waiting for me at the gate.

Not hidden.

Not distant.

Just there.

Like she said she would be.

"You're late," she says when I reach her.

I frown slightly. "You didn't even say a time."

"I did in my head."

"That's not how time works."

She hums like she's considering that seriously.

"Still counts."

We walk.

At first, it's awkward in that quiet way new things are.

But it doesn't stay awkward for long.

Alora starts talking.

Not in fragments.

Not in careful pieces.

Just... talking.

Like she decided silence isn't necessary anymore.

"You don't like crowds," she says casually as we pass the taxi rank.

"I tolerate them."

"You tense your shoulders before you even enter them."

I glance at her.

“Stop studying me.”

“I’m not studying you,” she replies.

“I’m learning you.”

That should have sounded intense.

Instead, it sounds warm.

Like she’s saying it’s normal.

Like it’s something people do when they care.

We stop at a small corner shop.

She buys two cold drinks without asking what I want.

Hands me one.

Same flavor I always pick.

I stare at it.

“You guessed,” I say.

“I didn’t guess,” she replies simply.

“You always look at it twice before choosing something else.”

We sit on the low wall outside the shop.

Shoulder distance.

But not emotional distance.

That part is gone now.

“You’re different,” I say before I can stop myself.

Alora tilts her head slightly.

“How?”

I hesitate.

Because it’s hard to explain.

“You feel... closer.”

A small pause.

Then she smiles.

Not the careful kind.

The real one.

“It’s because I stopped pretending I don’t want to be here.”

That hits my chest in a way I don’t fully understand yet.

The calls start after that.

Every night.

Not long.

Not forced.

Just... there.

Sometimes we talk.

Sometimes we don’t.

Sometimes she just breathes on the other side and I listen like that’s enough.

“You’re quiet tonight,” I say one evening.

“You’re thinking too loud,” she replies immediately.

I laugh softly.

“I don’t think that’s a thing.”

“It is for you.”

At some point, she starts giving me names.

Not my name.

Other ones.

Small ones.

Soft ones.

“Ash,” she says once.

I pause.

“What?”

“You’re an Ash.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“It is now.”

Another day:

“You’re quiet today, Star.”

“Star?”

“You look at things like you’re trying to remember where they belong.”

I don’t correct her.

That’s the strange part.

I start answering to them without thinking.

School feels different now.

Less heavy.

Less sharp.

Like something softened the edges of everything I used to move through carefully.

Behind the library, she sits closer than before.

This time, I don’t move away.

And neither does she.

“You told anyone about me yet?” she asks casually one afternoon.

I pause.

“...No.”

She nods.

“Good.”

That should have sounded controlling.

It doesn't.

It sounds like she's asking for something she cares about staying safe.

At home, I hesitate longer than I should.

My mother is in the kitchen when I get back.

“Who's been making you smile at your phone?” she asks without looking up.

I freeze.

“What?”

“You’ve been different,” she says simply.

“Less... far away.”

I don’t answer immediately.

Because I don’t know how to explain it without making it sound unreal.

But later that night, I do something I didn’t expect to do.

I sit on the edge of my bed.

Phone in hand.

And I tell her.

“My friend,” I say slowly, testing the words.

There’s a pause on the other end.

“What friend?” my mother asks.

I hesitate.

Then—

“Alora.”

The name feels strange leaving my mouth.

But not wrong.

Not anymore.

“Is she nice?” my mother asks.

I look down at my phone.

At her name still glowing in my recent calls.

At the last message she sent:

Call me when you get home, Ash.

I smile slightly without realizing it.

“Yeah,” I say quietly.

“She is.”

Later that night, Alora calls again.

“Did you tell someone about me?” she asks immediately.

I lie back on my bed.

“Yes.”

A pause.

Then her voice softens.

“Good.”

Another pause.

Then, quieter:

“Keep me real.”

I don’t understand that sentence yet.

But I hold onto it anyway.

Before we end the call, she says
something different.

Something lighter.

Something that sounds almost like
happiness.

“I like this version of us,” she says.

I close my eyes slightly.

“...Me too.”

When I fall asleep, my phone is still
beside me.

Still warm from her voice.

And for the first time since the
library,

I don't think about whether she'll
leave.

I only think about when I'll hear her
again.

Chapter 8: The Name I wear

Ashley's POV

I don't realize how obvious it's
become until people start smiling at
me differently.

Not in a mean way.

Not teasing.

Just knowing.

Like I'm carrying something visible now.

"You're happier lately."

Nthabi says it casually during lunch while stealing chips off my tray.

I roll my eyes automatically.

"You say that every week."

"No," she replies.

"I said you looked less tired. This is different."

I open my mouth to answer.

Then close it again.

Because I don't actually know how to explain this feeling without sounding ridiculous.

How do you tell someone:

There's a girl who notices when my voice changes slightly over the phone? A girl who waits for me after class like it's natural? A girl who remembers things I forgot telling her?

You don't.

You just smile into your food like an idiot apparently.

My phone vibrates against the table.

ALORA: You skipped breakfast again.

I immediately look up.

Across the courtyard, leaning against the corridor railing, she lifts one eyebrow slightly without even pretending she wasn't watching me.

Heat climbs into my face instantly.

Nthabi follows my gaze.

Then grins.

“Ohhh,” she says slowly.

“So that’s the problem.”

“She’s not a problem,” I say too quickly.

Nthabi’s grin widens.

“Didn’t say she was.”

I look back toward the corridor.

Alora is still there.

Hands hidden in her sleeves.

Looking at me like she knows exactly how flustered I am right now.

Which she probably does.

Later, between classes, she falls into step beside me so naturally it feels rehearsed.

Not forced.

Just known.

“You embarrassed me,” I mutter.

“You embarrass easily.”

“That’s not the point.”

A pause.

Then:

“You’re cute when you’re annoyed.”

I almost trip over absolutely nothing.

She notices that too.

Of course she does.

“You did that on purpose.”

“I say most things on purpose, Ash.”

Ash.

The nickname still does something violent to my heartbeat every single time.

We stop near my locker.

The ribbon tied to the handle shifts slightly in the hallway breeze.

Alora notices it immediately.

Her gaze flicks upward toward the small sticker near the top corner.

The one I added yesterday.

<3

Not obvious enough for teachers to care.

Obvious enough for her to understand.

“You decorated it,” she says softly.

I shrug like it’s not a big deal.

“It looked boring.”

A small silence.

Then:

“You used my favorite color.”

I blink.

“How do you know it was for you?”

Now she smiles.

Slowly.

Like she enjoys knowing something I haven't admitted yet.

"You placed the stickers unevenly on purpose," she says.

"So?"

"You only do that when you want something to look casual instead of intentional."

I stare at her.

"You make existing feel invasive."

"You like it."

"That's not—"

"You wore the bracelet today too."

I look down instinctively.

Rainbow beads.

Thin silver chain.

Her gift.

“I always wear it.”

“I know.”

There’s something about the way she says it that quiets me immediately.

Not possessive.

Not smug.

Just... soft.

The corridor starts filling with students again.

Noise rises around us.

But the space near Alora still feels strangely separate from everything else.

“You busy tonight?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Why?”

“I wanna call you.”

The simplicity of it catches me off guard.

Not:

Can I call?

Not:

Are you free?

Just:

I wanna call you.

And somehow that feels more intimate than almost anything else she's done.

"Okay," I say quietly.

She studies my face for a second.

Then reaches up suddenly—

and fixes the collar of my blazer.

The touch is brief.

Barely there.

Still enough to completely erase my
ability to think.

“You never straighten this properly,”
she murmurs.

My throat goes dry instantly.

When she steps back, she looks
unaffected.

I am absolutely not unaffected.

That night, we stay on call for almost
three hours.

Most of it isn't even conversation.

Just presence.

At one point I'm doing homework while she sketches something quietly on the other end.

"You still there?" I ask softly.

"Mhm."

"What're you drawing?"

"You."

I laugh nervously.

"That's creepy."

"No," she replies gently.

"You just think being noticed and being loved are different things."

Silence settles after that.

Not awkward.

Warm.

Then, quietly:

"Ash?"

"Yeah?"

“I like hearing your breathing.”

My pen stops moving.

The room suddenly feels too small
for my heartbeat.

“You say insane things casually,” I
whisper.

A soft laugh comes through the
phone.

“You stay anyway.”

And the terrifying thing is—
she’s right.

Before bed, I open the notebook.

The pages don’t scare me anymore.

They feel familiar now.

Expected.

A new sentence waits for me.

Truth #8: The fastest way to make someone part of your life is to make them part of your ordinary days.

I read it slowly.

Then glance toward my phone beside the pillow.

Her name still glowing faintly from the ended call.

And for the first time in years—
my life doesn't feel like something I'm surviving.

It feels like something I'm inside of.

Chapter 9: The timer

Alora's POV

The apartment smells like polished wood and silence.

Not empty silence.

Managed silence.

The kind that sits straight-backed at dinner tables and folds itself neatly into conversations that never go too deep.

My mother is already home when I walk in.

Laptop open.

Wine glass untouched beside her.

The television plays a news channel nobody is watching.

“You’re late,” she says without looking up.

“Extra class.”

A lie.

Easy.

Practiced.

She nods once like she expected the answer before asking.

That's usually how conversations work here.

Predictable.

Efficient.

Emotionally weightless.

"There's food in the kitchen," she says.

"We're leaving again next quarter most likely."

Just like that.

I stop walking for half a second.

Not because I'm surprised.

Because hearing it out loud always feels different.

"Where?" I ask carefully.

“Still being finalized.”

She scrolls through something on her laptop.

Conversation over.

I stand there another moment anyway.

Waiting for something else.

A warning.

An explanation.

Anything softer than logistics.

Nothing comes.

So I go to the kitchen.

My phone vibrates before I even reach the fridge.

ASH: Call?

I stare at the message.

Then laugh quietly under my breath.

Not because it's funny.

Because somehow Ashley always appears exactly when I feel myself drifting too far into this house.

I call immediately.

“You answered fast,” she says.

There’s background noise on her side.

Traffic.

Probably the taxi ride home.

“You asked.”

“That doesn’t mean people answer immediately.”

“It does when it’s you.”

Silence.

Then I hear her smile through the phone.

I’ve learned that sound already.

“What’re you doing?” she asks.

“Existing dramatically in my kitchen.”

“That’s embarrassing for you.”

“Mhm.”

I pull juice from the fridge while balancing the phone against my shoulder.

The kitchen lights are too bright.

Ashley’s voice helps.

“You sound tired,” she says after a while.

I open the cupboard slowly.

“Long day.”

“You get quieter when you’re tired.”

I pause briefly.

There it is again.

That feeling.

Ashley notices things now too.

“You act like that surprises you,” she says softly.

“What?”

“That I pay attention.”

I lean back against the counter.

Smile slightly to myself.

“It should probably concern me more.”

“It’s too late for concern,” she replies immediately.

And there’s the confidence again.

New.

Growing.

I hear movement on her side.

Then:

“Oh wait, I forgot to tell you.”

“What?”

“I finally fixed my locker completely.”

I already know.

I saw it earlier.

“You’re proud of yourself,” I say.

“I am.”

“You used uneven sticker spacing again.”

A gasp.

“You noticed?”

“Ash.”

“Right. Stupid question.”

I can practically picture the eye roll.

Something warm settles in my chest before I can stop it.

Dangerous.

Not because of her.

Because I’m getting used to this too.

“You know what I still don’t understand?” Ashley asks suddenly.

“What?”

“Why six months?”

My grip tightens slightly around the juice carton.

I stay quiet.

“A normal person would’ve said forever,” she continues lightly.

“Or a year. Or something less... specific.”

I close the fridge carefully.

Too carefully.

“A normal person wouldn’t hand strangers mysterious notebooks in libraries,” I reply.

“That’s not answering the question.”

“I know.”

A pause.

Then softer:

“So answer it.”

I look toward the kitchen entrance instinctively.

My mother’s typing echoes faintly from the living room.

Keys tapping like a countdown.

“Ash.”

“No, because seriously,” she says, laughing slightly now.

“Why six months? What happens after that?”

Too many things.

Airports.

Boxes.

Another country.

Another version of leaving quietly before attachment gets too permanent.

I swallow once.

Then shift smoothly like I always do.

“You’d hate forever with me anyway.”

“That’s literally not true.”

“You say that now.”

“No,” she replies instantly.

“I know that now.”

The certainty in her voice hits harder than I expect.

So I change the subject before she notices the silence stretching wrong.

“What color are your nails now?”

“Avoiding questions is toxic.”

“What color?”

“...Black.”

“Liar.”

She laughs immediately.

“Okay fine. Dark blue.”

“Mhm.”

“How did you know?”

“You only wear black when you’re upset.”

Silence.

Then quietly:

“That’s unfairly specific.”

I smile despite myself.

There.

Redirected.

Ashley lets herself be redirected
when the affection is soft enough.

Another thing I’ve learned.

We stay on call while I eat.

Mostly listening to each other
breathe between conversations.

It feels dangerously domestic.

Like something permanent
pretending to be temporary.

At one point Ashley gets quieter.

“You still there?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

A pause.

Then softly:

“I think my mom likes you already.”

I freeze briefly.

Not visibly.

Just internally.

Parents.

Real life.

Structures outside of us.

“That’s brave of her,” I say lightly.

Ashley laughs again.

Then quieter:

“I talk about you a lot now.”

Something in my chest pulls
painfully at that.

Because Ashley says things like that
without understanding their weight.

Like love is something you place
carefully into your future.

Like futures stay put.

Later that night, after the call ends, I
sit on the floor beside my bed.

Notebook open.

Pen unmoving.

The apartment is silent again.

Cold in the polished expensive way it
always is.

I stare at the blank page for a long
time before writing.

Truth#9: Some people love like they've never had to leave anything behind before.

I stop there.

Because the next sentence almost becomes:

And some people learn early that staying was never their choice.

But I don't write that one.

Not yet.

Chapter 10: The Things She Never Says

Ashley's POV

Alora never answered me.

Not really.

She just did what she always does when a question gets too close to something real.

She softened her voice.

Made me laugh.

Shifted the conversation sideways until I forgot I was waiting for an actual answer.

Why six months?

Such a simple question.

And somehow she treated it like I'd asked her to bleed.

I replay the call the next morning while brushing my teeth.

The pause before she answered.
The way her voice changed slightly
afterward.
The way she asked about my nails
like it mattered urgently.
Something about it sits wrong with
me.
Not dangerous wrong.
Just unfinished.
But by first break, she's smiling at
me across the corridor like nothing
happened.
And suddenly thinking becomes
difficult again.
"You're staring," she says as I reach
her.
"You're avoidant."
"That's a big word for someone
carrying a pink lunchbox."

I look down immediately.

“Oh my God.”

She laughs softly.

Actually laughs.

Not the tiny breathy thing she usually does.

“I told your mother you were responsible,” I mutter.

“You told your mother about me. That’s more embarrassing.”

Heat climbs straight into my face.

“You keep bringing that up.”

“Because you’re cute when you panic.”

I hate how well that works on me.

She walks beside me toward the back field while stealing pieces of my lunch like she packed none herself.

Which she probably didn't.

"You know," I say slowly, "normal girlfriends usually answer questions."

"Normal girlfriends don't survive me."

"That's concerning."

"Mhm."

The field is mostly empty today.

Too windy for people to sit around comfortably.

Which means Alora likes it.

She sits on the low concrete steps and stretches her legs out slightly.

I sit beside her automatically now.

Like there was never another option.

"You still thinking about it?" she asks quietly after a while.

“The six months thing?”

She nods once.

I pull at the sleeve of my blazer.

“A little.”

Alora looks ahead instead of at me.

“That’s unfortunate.”

“See?” I point at her immediately.

“That! You do that weird thing where you respond without actually responding.”

She smiles slightly.

“You understand me anyway.”

“That’s not the point.”

“It usually becomes the point eventually.”

I stare at her profile.

The wind keeps moving strands of dark hair across her face.

She ignores it every time.

“You know what your problem is?” I ask.

“Several things come to mind.”

“You act like feelings are homework.”

That gets her attention.

She turns toward me properly now.

“What does that mean?”

“You study them instead of just having them.”

Silence.

Not awkward.

Just still.

Then she laughs quietly to herself.

Not mocking.

Almost surprised.

“That’s a very Ashley sentence.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You say emotionally devastating things casually and then look confused when people react.”

I roll my eyes.

But I’m smiling.

Alora notices immediately.

Of course she does.

“You’re doing it again,” she says softly.

“Doing what?”

“Looking at me like I’m something you’re trying to keep.”

My stomach flips painfully.

Because I don’t know how to answer that honestly.

A group of students pass nearby loudly arguing about music.

The moment breaks slightly.

Enough for me to breathe again.

“Come with me after school,” Alora says suddenly.

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

“That sounds illegal.”

“It’s not illegal if we walk confidently.”

I stare at her.

“You genuinely concern me.”

“And yet.”

“And yet,” I repeat quietly.

After school, she takes me through streets I don’t usually walk.

Past small shops.

Past a bookstore with faded signs.

Past a woman selling fruit outside a taxi stop.

“Where are we going?”

“You ask too many questions.”

“You answer too few.”

That earns me a smile.

Eventually we stop at a tiny convenience shop near the edge of town.

The old man behind the counter greets Alora like he already knows her.

“You brought your girl today,” he says casually.

I nearly choke on absolutely nothing.

Alora just nods calmly.

“Mhm.”

No hesitation.

No awkwardness.

Like the words fit naturally beside her.

The warmth that spreads through my chest after that feels almost unbearable.

She buys me a drink before I can protest.

Again.

Same flavor.

Again.

“You know,” I say while we walk back outside, “you’re very smug for someone who refuses to communicate.”

“I communicate constantly.”

“You communicate like a cryptic side character in a fantasy movie.”

“That’s specific.”

“It’s accurate.”

She hands me the drink.
Our fingers brush briefly.
Neither of us pulls away immediately
this time.
The evening air feels softer now.
Golden around the edges.
“I’m serious though,” I say quietly.
“About what?”
“The six months thing.”
Her expression changes slightly.
Tiny shift.
But I catch it now.
“I know,” she says softly.
“Then tell me.”
A long pause.
For one impossible second, I think
she actually will.
But then she looks at me—

really looks at me—

and smiles gently instead.

“You’d ruin the timing if I told you everything early, Ash.”

I groan loudly.

“That is SUCH an Alora answer.”

“You still like me.”

“That’s unfortunately true.”

She laughs again.

And somehow that becomes enough to make the unfinished feeling disappear for now.

Which is probably the problem.

That night, I open the notebook while still smiling from the walk home.

The new sentence waits quietly on the page.

Truth #10: Sometimes people avoid answering because the truth changes the shape of everything after it.

I trace the words slowly with my thumb.

Then I think about the way she looked at me before changing the subject again.

Not cold.

Not distant.

Almost sad.

But before I can sit with that feeling too long, my phone buzzes beside me.

ALORA: Did you drink the juice or are you staring at it emotionally?

I laugh out loud alone in my room.

And just like that—

she pulls me back out of my thoughts again.

Chapter 11: Background Noise

Ashley's POV

The call starts at 9:12 AM.

Neither of us hangs up for the rest of the day.

It isn't planned.

That's the strange part.

Nothing dramatic happens.

No big confession.

No emergency.

Just Alora answering my call half-
awake with a rough voice and
immediately saying:

“Why are you conscious this early?”

I grin into my pillow.

“You called me at 2 AM yesterday.”

“You answered.”

“You said you missed me.”

A pause.

Then, sleep-heavy:

“I did miss you.”

And somehow that becomes enough
reason to stay.

The call follows us everywhere after
that.

Through breakfast.

Through chores.

Through silence.

At one point I'm helping my mother fold laundry while Alora brushes her hair on the other side of the screen.

Neither of us is talking.

But every few minutes one of us checks if the other is still there.

"You disappeared," she says suddenly.

"I was literally folding towels."

"You went quiet."

"That's not disappearing."

"Mhm."

I laugh softly.

Then prop my phone against a cereal box while stealing grapes from the kitchen counter.

“What’re you doing now?” she asks.

“Existing.”

“Poorly?”

“Very.”

She smiles at that.

Small.

Tired.

Pretty enough to make my stomach flip anyway.

Around noon she takes me outside with her.

Not intentionally.

She just forgets the call is still running while walking to a nearby shop.

So now I'm seeing pieces of her
world I wasn't supposed to yet.

Grey pavement.

Apartment buildings.

Wind against the microphone.

A glimpse of her sleeve while she
reaches for money.

"You're staring," she says without
looking at the screen.

"You're interesting."

"That's unfortunate for both of us."

I watch her walk the whole way back.

The camera shaking slightly with
every step.

She keeps checking if I'm still there.

Not verbally.

Just quick glances downward.

Tiny unconscious things.

And every single one makes something warm settle deeper inside my chest.

Back home, I'm lying on my bedroom floor doing homework while she sketches quietly at her desk.

"You alive?" I ask eventually.

"Mhm."

"What're you drawing now?"

Silence.

Too much silence.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

"It's me again, isn't it?"

A soft laugh.

"You're easy to draw."

"That's creepy."

"You've said that before."

"And I meant it every time."

She angles the sketchbook away from the camera immediately.

Which only proves I'm right.

"Play me something," she says suddenly.

"What?"

"Music."

"You know my music taste is embarrassing."

"I know your music taste is dramatic."

"That too."

I scroll through my playlist slowly.

Then stop.

Because there's one song I've been avoiding sending her for days now.

Not because it's romantic.

Because it's honest.

“You can’t laugh,” I warn.

“That depends entirely on your choice.”

I narrow my eyes.

Then send it anyway.

A song about being loved gently for the first time.

About feeling safe enough to soften.

The call goes quiet after she starts listening.

Too quiet.

“You hate it?” I ask nervously.

“No.”

Her voice is softer now.

“Play it again.”

So I do.

The second time, she doesn’t speak at all.

Just listens.

And something about that feels more intimate than if she'd started confessing things dramatically.

"You know what the problem with you is?" she says quietly after the song ends.

"Oh, good. We're back to psychological warfare."

"You make ordinary things feel devastating."

I smile despite myself.

"You stayed on the call all day voluntarily."

"That's true."

"You even watched me organize my pens."

"You organized them by emotional importance."

“They HAVE emotional importance.”

“You’re insane, Ash.”

But she says it fondly.

Later, evening light starts pouring gold through my curtains.

My phone battery is dying.

Her voice sounds lower now.

Sleepier.

Neither of us mentions ending the call.

“You still there?” I murmur eventually.

“Yeah.”

“You’re quiet again.”

“I’m listening to you breathe.”

My heartbeat stumbles immediately.

“That shouldn’t work on me anymore,” I whisper.

“But it does.”

“It really does.”

A soft laugh comes through the speaker.

Then silence again.

Not empty silence.

Full silence.

The kind where someone’s presence settles around your entire day until being alone starts feeling unnatural.

“You know what’s weird?” I say quietly.

“What?”

“We literally did nothing today.”

“Mhm.”

“But somehow it feels important.”

Alora doesn’t answer immediately.

Then, very softly:

“That’s usually how love feels before people notice it.”

The room goes completely still around me.

Because she didn’t say:

this is love.

She said:

before people notice it.

Like she already knows something I’m still catching up to.

That night, after we finally hang up sometime past midnight, my room feels too quiet without her voice in it.

I open the notebook slowly.

The page waits.

Truth #11: Love becomes dangerous when someone starts feeling present even in their absence.

I stare at the sentence for a long time.

Then glance toward the dark phone screen beside me.

Still warm from her voice.

And for the first time—

I think maybe Alora isn't becoming part of my life anymore.

Maybe she already is.

Chapter 12:Delivered

Ashley's POV

Alora disappears on a Friday night.

Not dramatically.

Not with a fight.

Not even with a warning.

One minute she's on call with me,
half-listening while I complain about
homework.

The next:

“Wait, my mother's calling me—”

Then silence.

Call ended.

I smile at first.

Because that happens sometimes.

Strict parents.

Random interruptions.

Alora disappearing for an hour or two isn't unusual.

So I text her casually.

ASH: Tell your mother I said hi .

No reply.

Still normal.

By midnight, I send another.

ASH: You alive?

Delivered.

Not read.

I sleep with my phone beside my face anyway.

Saturday morning feels wrong immediately.

Not emotionally.

Physically.

Like waking up and realizing something familiar is missing from the room.

I check my phone before my eyes fully adjust to the light.

Nothing.

No “good morning.”

No random observation about my sleeping schedule.

No:

You probably forgot breakfast already.

Just silence.

I text first again.

ASH: Good morning star girl.

Not delivered.

My stomach tightens slightly.

I try calling.

Straight to voicemail.

“Okay,” I whisper to myself.

“She’s probably grounded.”

That explanation works for exactly
forty minutes.

Then I text again.

ASH: Did you die? Be serious.

Still nothing.

The entire day starts feeling uneven
after that.

I keep reaching for my phone
instinctively.

During breakfast.

During laundry.

During a movie my mother tries to watch with me.

“You’re distracted today,” she says eventually.

I force a smile.

“No I’m not.”

“You checked your phone six times during one scene.”

“...Maybe I’m a little distracted.”

She studies me carefully.

Then smiles slightly.

“Alora?”

Just hearing the name out loud makes something ache sharply in my chest.

I hate that.

“Her phone’s off,” I say quietly.

My mother hums once.

“She’ll answer eventually.”

I nod.

Pretend that helps.

But by Saturday night, I’ve started doing embarrassing things.

Like opening our old messages just to feel less alone.

Like replaying voice notes.

Like typing texts I delete before sending because suddenly I sound insane.

Are you okay?

Delete.

Did I do something wrong?

Delete.

I miss you.

Delete immediately.

At 11:47 PM, I finally send:

ASH: You disappeared properly this time huh

Still not delivered.

I stare at the tiny clock beside the message until my eyes blur.

Sunday is worse.

Because now it's not confusion anymore.

It's absence.

Everything reminds me of her accidentally.

The juice she likes.

The song she replayed twice.

The hoodie she left around my shoulders last week because I said I was cold.

I find myself checking my phone before doing things automatically.

Like my brain still expects her
commentary attached to every part
of my day.

You skipped lunch again.

Drink water.

Your handwriting gets messier when
you're upset.

Silence.

By afternoon, I stop pretending I'm
handling it well.

ASH: Okay this is getting rude now.

ASH: At least haunt me a little.

ASH: I saw dark blue nail polish
today and got emotionally attacked.

ASH: I hate you a little.

Three minutes later:

ASH: not actually.

None of them send.

My chest feels tight in a humiliatingly specific way.

Because suddenly I understand something terrible:

I built pieces of my day around her without noticing.

Not huge things.

Tiny things.

Constant things.

Who I text first when something funny happens.

Who I send songs to.

Who I look for instinctively in crowds.

Alora slipped into my routines so quietly I never noticed how much space she took up until everything echoed without her in it.

Sunday night, I sit cross-legged on my bed staring at our chat again.

Last seen: two days ago.

I type slowly this time.

ASH: I think I got too used to you.

My thumb hovers over send.

Then presses it anyway.

Not delivered.

Something inside me sinks after that.

Not panic.

Not yet.

Just realization.

I miss her in a way that feels
frighteningly close to withdrawal.

And the worst part?

I don't even know if she knows she's
doing this to me.

Before bed, I open the notebook with
shaking hands.

I don't know what I'm expecting anymore.

But the next sentence is already there.

Truth #12: The hardest part of attachment is realizing silence can physically change the shape of your days.

I close my eyes immediately after reading it.

Because suddenly the room feels too quiet.

Too still.

Too much like before her.

And I realize something I don't want to admit out loud.

I don't just miss Alora.

I miss the version of myself that exists when she's there.

Chapter 13: Princess Ash

Ashley's POV

Monday morning hurts before I even open my eyes.

Not emotionally at first.

Habitually.

My hand reaches for my phone automatically.

Still half asleep.

Still expecting disappointment.

The screen lights up.

ALORA Morning... princess.

That's it.

No explanation.

No apology.

No:

sorry I disappeared for three days
and made you feel like your lungs
forgot how to work properly.

Just:

Morning... princess.

And the horrifying thing is-
my entire body softens immediately
anyway.

I stare at the message for a full
minute.

Then another.

Because there's something deeply unfair about the way Alora texts.

Like every sentence was designed specifically to disarm me.

Princess.

She's never called me that before.

And suddenly I can't even remember why I was angry.

Which is pathetic.

Actually pathetic.

I type fast.

Too fast.

ASH: You vanished for 3 business days.

Three dots appear instantly.

Disappear.

Come back.

ALORA: Dramatic.

ASH: I almost died.

ALORA: But you survived.

ASH: Barely.

A pause.

Then:

ALORA: Good. I missed you.

There it is again.

That thing she does.

Like she knows exactly which words
to place carefully enough to make
every bruise feel temporary.

I throw my face into my pillow
aggressively.

Then immediately text back.

ASH: You're evil.

She replies almost instantly.

ALORA: And yet you're smiling.

The worst part?

I am.

By the time I get to school, my anger has dissolved into anticipation.

Which should concern me more than it does.

I spot her near the science block before she sees me.

Black hoodie under her blazer again.

Hands hidden in sleeves.

Headphones around her neck this time.

And suddenly the last three days feel unreal.

Like I imagined them.

Then she looks up.

Her face changes immediately when she sees me.

Not dramatically.

Just softer.

Like her body recognizes mine
before her thoughts catch up.

"You look emotionally unstable," she
says as I approach.

I stop in front of her.

Stare.

"You disappeared."

"You've said."

"For THREE DAYS."

"Mhm."

"You're saying mhm like I'm
discussing the weather."

A tiny smile pulls at her mouth.

"You're cute when you're angry,
princess."

My brain fully stops functioning for a
second.

Because now she's doing it in person too.

"That nickname is manipulative," I mutter weakly.

"You like it."

"I hate that you're right all the time."

She reaches up suddenly and fixes a strand of hair near my forehead.

Quick.

Gentle.

My heartbeat completely loses structure.

"There," she says quietly.

"You looked stressed."

"You CAUSED the stress."

"Mhm."

I narrow my eyes.

She smiles properly this time.

God.

This girl could probably stab me and call me pretty afterward and I'd forgive her immediately.

"You know what your problem is?" I say while we walk toward class.

"I'm sure you'll tell me."

"You act like disappearing for days is normal."

For the first time that morning, something flickers across her face.

Not guilt exactly.

Something quieter.

"My house gets complicated sometimes," she says carefully.

The softness in her voice immediately weakens my anger again.

I hate that too.

"You could've warned me."

"I know."

That answer lands differently
because she sounds sincere this
time.

Not evasive.

Not teasing.

Just tired.

Silence settles between us briefly.

Then she bumps her shoulder lightly
against mine.

Tiny contact.

Still enough to steady something in
me immediately.

"I brought you something," she says.

My eyebrows lift.

"You're bribing me?"

"Yes."

"At least you're honest."

"Mhm."

She pulls a small packet from her bag.

My favorite biscuits.

The expensive ones I only buy occasionally because they feel unnecessary.

"You remembered."

"You say that like it's difficult."

There's no performance in the way she says things like that.

No expectation of praise.

Just certainty.

Like remembering me is the easiest thing she does all day.

At lunch, she steals my phone while I'm distracted.

When I get it back, my contact name has changed.

Princess Ash □

"You're actually insane."

"You answered all my calls with attitude this morning. I adapted."

"I'm blocking you."

"You'd cry after six minutes."

"...Probably."

She laughs softly at that.

Not meanly.

Affectionately.

And suddenly I understand something dangerous again:

Alora doesn't fix problems.

She dissolves them.

Not by solving them.

By making me want her more than I
want answers.

That evening, we stay on call while I
study.

Again.

Like the weekend never happened.

Like silence never swallowed me
whole for three days.

At one point she says my name
quietly for no reason.

Just:

"Ash."

"Yeah?"

Nothing.

Just her breathing for a second.

Then:

"Missed hearing you."

And somehow that becomes enough
to heal parts of me she created
cracks in herself.

Before bed, I open the notebook
slowly.

The page waits patiently.

Truth #13: Some people can return
so gently that you start forgiving
them before they even apologize.

I stare at the sentence for a long
time.

Then think about:

Morning... princess.

And the terrifying thing is-
if she disappeared again tomorrow,
I already know I'd still wait for her to
come back.

Chapter 14: The Language She Invented

Ashley's POV

Alora starts talking to me like I've always been hers.

Not in a loud way.

Not in a claim-everything way.

In a quiet adjustment of language
that slowly rewrites what I think
words mean.

It happens in small pieces.

Like I won't notice unless I'm paying
attention.

"You didn't eat again, Ash."

"You're overthinking again,
princess."

"Come here."

Not asked.

Just said.

And somehow I still move.

We're sitting behind the library steps
when she says it first.

Like it's nothing.

Like it's been true for years.

"You're mine when you're like this."

I pause mid-sip of my drink.

“...Excuse me?”

She tilts her head slightly.

Not surprised by my reaction.

Just observing it.

“I said you’re mine when you’re like this,” she repeats.

“Like what?”

“Soft.”

“That is not a normal sentence.”

“It is for you.”

I almost choke.

“Alora.”

“Mm?”

“You can’t just say things like that casually.”

“I can.”

I stare at her.

She looks completely calm.

Like she didn't just rearrange my heartbeat.

"You disappeared for three days and now you're acting like you didn't emotionally damage me," I say.

A pause.

Then she leans back slightly against the step.

"I told you," she says softly.

"My house gets complicated."

"That's not an explanation."

"It's the only one I have right now."

Something in her voice softens at the end.

Not defensive.

Just... contained.

That makes it harder to stay annoyed.

We sit in silence for a while.

The wind moves through the space behind the library.

Students pass somewhere far above us.

Life continues like nothing important is happening here.

Then she shifts closer.

Not dramatically.

Just enough that her shoulder touches mine.

“You’re warm today,” she says.

“That’s not a personality trait.”

“It is for you.”

I roll my eyes.

But I don’t move away.

That's the part I notice later.
Not what she said.
What I didn't do.
We start walking after break.
She holds my bag without asking.
Again.
"You're spoiling me," I say.
"I'm training you."
"For what?"
"To stop resisting care."
I stop walking for half a second.
"That sounds illegal."
"It's not."
"It feels like it should be."
She looks at me briefly.
Then smiles.
Small.

Soft.

Dangerously normal.

“You like it though,” she says.

I open my mouth.

Close it.

Because she’s right again.

We pass a group of girls near the tuckshop.

One of them calls out:

“Is that your girlfriend?”

I freeze instantly.

Alora doesn’t.

She just looks over casually.

“Yes,” she says.

No hesitation.

No performance.

No checking me first.

My brain fully stops working.
The girls giggle and walk away.
The moment ends.
But I don't recover from it.
"Did you just—" I start.
"Yes."
"You didn't even ask me."
"I didn't need to."
I stare at her.
"You're unbelievable."
"I know."
But her voice is softer now.
Not smug.
Just certain.
We reach the corridor near my class.
She stops me before I go in.
"Wait."

“What?”

She adjusts my blazer collar again.

Slowly this time.

Like she’s taking her time on purpose.

“You keep looking tired,” she says quietly.

“You caused half of it.”

“Mhm.”

Then, softer:

“But I like taking care of you.”

That sentence lands differently.

Not dramatic.

Just final.

Like she didn’t say it to impress me.

She said it because it’s already part of her.

I don’t know what to do with that.

So I do the only thing I can.

I look away.

That night, we're on call while I lie on my bed staring at the ceiling.

She's drawing again.

I can hear the pencil through the speaker.

"What are you drawing now?" I ask.

"You."

"Still?"

"You change too fast to stop."

I go quiet.

Then:

"That's kind of weird, you know."

"I know."

A pause.

Then she says it again.

Quieter.

“You’re mine when you’re like this.”

I sit up immediately.

“Alora.”

“Mm?”

“Stop saying that.”

A small silence.

Then:

“Why?”

And I don’t have an answer that doesn’t sound like I’m lying.

So I change the subject instead.

“What are you eating?”

She sighs softly.

“You avoid things a lot.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

But she doesn’t push.

That's her pattern too.
Push just enough to be felt.
Never enough to break.
Before we sleep, she says something
lighter.
Almost playful.
"Goodnight, Ash."
"Goodnight, princess," I reply
automatically.
Silence.
Then her voice, softer than usual:
"I like when you say that."
I freeze slightly.
"...Why?"
"Because it sounds like you chose
me back."
The call ends after that.

And I lie there for a long time staring at my ceiling.

Because something about her words doesn't feel like flirting anymore.

It feels like a rule she's slowly teaching me to follow.

Without me noticing.

Chapter 15: The Three Words

Alora's POV

There are moments where silence stops being empty and starts being dangerous.

This is one of them.

Ashley is on the other end of the call, talking about something small—school, a teacher, a pen she lost and found again in the same place it always was.

Her voice is soft in the background of my room.

Familiar now.

Like it belongs here.

I should interrupt her.

I should steer the conversation away like I usually do when things get too close to edges I don't step over.

But I don't.

Because I already know what I'm
going to do tonight.

And for once, I don't change
direction.

"Ash," I say quietly.

She stops mid-sentence.

"Yeah?"

There's a pause after that.

Not confusion.

Just attention.

She always listens like that now.

I sit down on the edge of my bed.

The room is half-packed again.

A box open near the wall.

My life arranged in temporary order.

"I need to say something," I add.

Her voice shifts slightly.

More awake now.

“Okay...”

I inhale once.

I’ve said everything carefully up until now.

Measured.

Controlled.

Designed to be felt without being fully understood.

This is not that.

“I love you.”

The words land too cleanly in the space between us.

No decoration.

No cushioning.

No strategy.

Just truth.

Silence.

It lasts longer than it should.

On her end, I hear a small sound—
like she moved too fast or forgot how
to sit still.

“Alora...” she says my name like
she’s checking if I’m serious.

“I mean it,” I say immediately.

Because I do.

There’s no hesitation in that part.

I’ve been building toward this
without meaning to admit it.

Ashley breathes out slowly.

“You... you do?”

“Yes.”

Another silence.

Different this time.

Not confusion.

Processing.

I can almost see it happening—her mind trying to place the words somewhere safe and failing.

“I don’t know what to say,” she admits quietly.

“You don’t have to say anything,” I reply.

And I mean that too.

Because this wasn’t meant to be balanced.

It was meant to be real.

I glance at the box near my bed again.

Six months was never a metaphor.

It was a countdown I never told her she was inside.

Ashley’s voice comes again, softer now.

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

A pause.

Then, even quieter:

“Why now?”

That question sits between us for a moment.

I could answer it.

I could tell her about moving.

About how things never stay.

About how I learned early that love without endings doesn't exist in my world.

But I don't.

Not yet.

So I shift slightly on the bed and look at the ceiling instead.

“Because I wanted you to hear it before everything gets complicated,” I say.

It’s not the full truth.

But it’s close enough for tonight.

On the other end, she’s silent again.

Then:

“I think I’ve liked you for a while,” she says suddenly.

That catches me off guard in a way I don’t show.

Not because I didn’t know.

Because she finally said it out loud.

I close my eyes briefly.

“That’s dangerous,” I murmur.

“For who?” she asks immediately.

Me.

For both of us.

But I don't say that either.

Instead, I exhale slowly.

"You make things stick," I say.

A small laugh from her.

"That's not my fault."

"It is a little."

And for the first time in a long time, I let myself smile without thinking about what comes after it.

"Ash," I say softly.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to be honest with you about something soon."

A pause.

Her voice tightens slightly.

"Soon as in... good soon or bad soon?"

I look at the box again.

At the life already preparing to leave
without asking permission.

“Both,” I say.

Silence follows.

Not heavy.

Just real.

Then Ashley speaks again, quieter
than before.

“Okay,” she says.

Just that.

No argument.

No fear turned into noise.

Just acceptance of something she
doesn’t understand yet.

And that somehow hurts more than
anything else tonight.

“I love you,” I say again before I can
overthink it.

This time softer.

Not as a confession.

As a fact I don't want to leave
unsaid.

"I love you too," she replies
immediately.

No hesitation.

No delay.

Too honest for something this early.

And that's when I realize something
I've been avoiding for too long.

This isn't just affection anymore.

It's attachment.

And attachment has consequences I
haven't told her about yet.

The call stays open for a while after
that.

Neither of us really speaks.

But neither of us leaves either.
And I let myself stay in that silence a
little longer than I should.
Because next time I speak clearly...
it won't be gentle.

Chapter 16:Theres No Good in Goodbye

Ashley's POV

It starts like a perfect day.

That's the first thing my brain
refuses to forgive later.

The mall is loud in the way good
things are supposed to be.

Alora walks beside me like she
belongs in every frame of my life.

Like she's always been there and I
just started noticing her properly.

She buys me things I don't need.

Steals my drink.

Fixes my hair when I'm not looking.

Laughs at something I say like I'm
not just talking, but existing
correctly.

"You're quiet today," she says.

"I'm just... happy," I reply.

She looks at me for a second too long.

Then smiles.

And I remember that moment later.

Over and over.

Because it was the last time happiness didn't feel like a warning.

We leave the mall when the sky starts to turn soft orange.

She suggests walking.

I don't question it.

I never really question her anymore.

She calls me before I notice anything is wrong.

I answer smiling.

"Hey."

"Hi, Ash."

Her voice doesn't match the day.

My smile fades slightly.

"What's wrong?"

A pause.

Long enough that my stomach
tightens.

"I need you to listen," she says.

I stop walking.

"Okay," I reply.

Then she says it.

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

The world doesn't stop.

But I do.

"...Leaving where?"

"Another country."

Silence.

Not confusion.

Not denial.

Just something inside me going completely still.

"No," I say immediately. "No, that's not-Alora, you can't just say that like it's normal."

"It is normal," she replies quietly.

That word.

Normal.

Like I was never supposed to attach meaning to her staying at all.

My voice breaks slightly.

"What about us?"

Another pause.

Then:

"This started in the library," she says.

My chest tightens instantly.

The notebook.

The tea.

The rules.

"You said six months," she continues.

"And sixteen truths."

My grip tightens on the phone.

"That wasn't supposed to mean this,"
I say quickly.

"It was a game, Ash."

The word hits like something sharp.

"No," I whisper.

"Yes," she says softly.

Not cruel.

Not emotional.

Just final.

"I showed you what love looks like,"
she continues.

My throat tightens.

"You made me feel it," I say.

A pause.

Then she says it.

"You were mine when I was there."

My entire body goes still.

"But I was never yours."

Silence explodes after that.

Not loud.

Just total.

I shake my head.

"No... no, that's not-Alora, you don't get to say that after everything."

"I didn't lie," she interrupts softly.

That stops me.

Completely.

"I meant everything I showed you," she says.

A pause.

Then quieter:

"I just never stayed."

My breath shakes.

"Why?" I ask.

Long silence.

Then:

"Because I needed to know if I could make someone feel it," she says.

My chest drops.

"That's not an answer," I whisper.

"It's the truth."

And that word again.

Truth.

Like everything was always leading here.

"Ash," she says softly.

I flinch.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" I ask immediately.

"For leaving?"

"No," she says.

And then her voice changes.

"For what it became."

Silence.

Then:

"I have to go."

"No-wait-don't-Alora please-"

Voicemail.

I stare at the screen.

Call again.

Voicemail.

Again.

Voicemail.

My hands shake now.

Messages.

ASH: answer me

ASH: please don't do this

ASH: this isn't funny

ASH: ahora please

Send.

Delivered.

Then:

Not delivered.

My stomach drops.

And then I see it.

Instagram notification.

Her story.

Black screen.

White text.

I never wanted to hurt her, but it
seems I've done worse.

I sit down without realizing I'm
falling.

And then the silence begins.
At first, I think she'll come back.
That this is just one of her
disappearances.
So I wait.
Then I start checking.
Every day.
Messages.
Calls.
Old voice notes.
Nothing.
Her contact stops existing like it was
never anchored anywhere real.
But the notebook remains.
And that's the worst part.
Because she didn't erase herself
completely.
She left proof.

I open it again.

Truth #1.

Truth #2.

Truth #3.

Each one now feels different.

Not memories.

Evidence.

Then I reach the last page.

My hands stop before I even read it properly.

Because it's different.

No numbering.

Just bold text.

THE LIE: I never wanted any of this.

I stare at it.

My brain refuses to choose a meaning.

If it's true... then everything was accidental.

If it's false... then everything was intentional.

But neither feels complete.

Because there's a third option I don't want to admit.

That she wanted it and didn't want it.

That she felt it and called it wrong.

That leaving was part of loving in the only way she knew how.

I close the notebook slowly.

My fingers don't feel like mine anymore.

Because I understand something I can't prove.

Alora didn't stay long enough to become mine.

But she stayed long enough to make
me believe she did.

And now she is gone.

Not just from my life.

But from the version of me that
existed before her.

And the worst part is-

I don't know if I was loved.

Or studied.

Or both.

But I know one thing for certain.

She moved on.

And I am still here,

reading the same truths

like they might change if I

understand them correctly this time.

End.